

Maple Shade's in the Running for State Help

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MAPLE SHADE -- The township is one of six finalists in the running for a "Main Street New Jersey" designation this year.

Yesterday, a team led by representatives from the state Department of Community Affairs, which administers the revitalization assistance program, visited Maple Shade's Main Street as part of its review.

The towns of Caldwell, Montclair and Orange in Essex County, Newton in Sussex County and Somerville in Somerset County are also finalists, a DCA spokesman said. The final designations are expected to be announced by next month.

"I was thrilled," said Ellen McDowell, the president of the Maple Shade Business Association who spearheaded the effort. "I can't say I was that surprised because I knew we did a really great job on the application...I have a really good feeling."

The application included some 450 letters of support for Maple Shade, with pledges of monetary and in-kind contributions toward revitalization of the downtown business district.

The state program is designed to address declining downtowns by helping municipal officials and property owners in a designated district improve the economy, appearance and image of the area. A "Main Street" designation brings with it the state's technical assistance and expertise in revitalizing downtown districts.

Burlington City and Mount Holly are the only municipalities in Burlington County with the Main Street New Jersey designation.

McDowell said the state team, including DCA staff members and representatives from the state Department of Transportation and the state Economic Development Authority, canvassed Main Street yesterday.

The point of the visit is to discuss the program and meet with local businesses to discuss Main Street, DCA spokes-man Chris Donnelly said.

"The team will look to verify the strength of community support in both the public and private sectors as well as get a better feel of the proposed Main Street district," he said.

The team spoke to McDowell, Mayor Claire Volpe and Councilman Jack Galloway.

"They wanted to see our town for themselves and talk to some of the people on Main Street who were walking around and some of the business owners there," McDowell said.

She said the group asked about second-floor residential units on Main Street and the size of the proposed district, which would cover Main Street from Coles Avenue to Route 73.

“They thought maybe a smaller district would be better so we could see real results there first and then (improvements) could work their way out to the other parts of Main Street,” McDowell said. “You would really get a snowball effect.”

Maple Shade has been looking for several years for ways to revitalize as Main Street businesses have closed, leaving vacant storefronts and decreased foot traffic.

Last year, the business association failed to garner support for a business improvement district, which would have required all commercial entities on Main Street to contribute money for a revitalization effort.